

# Local Author Collections in Libraries<sup>1</sup>

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AT FIRST this study was to cover definitions of the term "local author" only. As the plan evolved, other matters assumed importance, as, for example, the location of local author collections, their purpose and scope, their usefulness, policies of exclusion and inclusion, and cooperative collecting and maintenance schemes. A trial questionnaire, sent to New England libraries by Philip McNiff, of Harvard, elicited so much interest that the committee decided to make a questionnaire survey of libraries throughout the United States.

A questionnaire prepared by the late John VanMale, then chairman of the committee, was answered by 284 libraries. The replies came from 110 public libraries, 103 college and university libraries, 35 state libraries, and 36 from a miscellaneous group which included society and institutional libraries not belonging in any of the previously mentioned categories. Of these libraries, 175 reported the existence of local author collections.

From the replies received it would be possible to select considerable information that might be of interest in a more extended report. Whether or not a library *buys* for such a collection or relies upon gifts; is inclusive or excludes all but "meritorious" titles; reserves a first or only copy or

duplicates freely; shelves such a collection as a whole or classifies and relies upon the catalog to bring out the locality tie; includes or eliminates fiction; stresses first editions; stresses "major" writers—these are questions which because of limitations of time and space have been excluded from this report. An analysis by geographical areas might produce interesting data, although the honors seem to belong, unchallenged by any of the reports received, to the State of Ohio and its Martha Kinney Cooper Library at Columbus.

## *Policies of Collection*

The importance of understanding the sectional structure of our country is generally recognized, and many libraries have attempted to secure and preserve the works of local authors as a record of the intellectual and cultural development of a community or an area. Such collections have validity for their psychological and advertising value for the area covered, and can be justified as records of local intellectual activity. However, as printed materials continue to pour from presses in ever increasing amounts, these collections show a tendency to grow out of bounds and to become "white elephants," especially if a nonselective, all-inclusive policy is followed. On the other hand, if a selective policy is pursued, it can be successfully argued that the purpose of the collection is thereby defeated, but that the intellectual growth or level of the area cannot be determined solely by what is "best" in its output.

<sup>1</sup> Report of a survey undertaken by the American Library Association Bibliography Committee. This study of the scope, content, and handling of local author collections was undertaken in response to a request for information from Ruby Egbert, technical processes librarian, Washington State Library.

At the outset it should be noted that in a great many of the replies the term "local author collections" appears to be regarded as synonymous with "local history collection," and for that reason many of the data submitted have proved difficult to interpret. Some local author collections are merged in local history collections. Indeed, in all but a handful of libraries, existing current practice tends to include in such collections only writers of fiction, or history, occasionally *belles lettres*, and to disregard writers in the fields of art, music, technology, business, and the social sciences. Surely these latter are as illustrative of community progress, and therefore as important to collect as are the former.

These collections of miscellaneous works which have no common denominator except that of the local birth or residence of the writers seem, for the most part, to have been assembled on a guesswork basis of what might prove interesting to readers or useful in some other way. A few libraries aim at bibliographical completeness, but one library has limited its field of interest to five authors only and collects only autographed first editions of these.

#### *Criteria for Inclusion*

Definitions of the term "local author" vary widely. Birth in the area is a generally accepted criterion, but one librarian remarked that there is no point in claiming as native sons or daughters authors who do not reciprocate. She cited the case of Edna Ferber who, it was said, remembers with loathing her days in Ottumwa, Iowa. Education in the area is another but less generally accepted criterion. Residence for a specified period of years—the lowest mentioned is four—during which creative work was produced, is commonly accepted, but one reply points out that an author who has lived in the area less than fifteen years

is not regarded as "local." Caroline Engstfeld's *Bibliography of Alabama Authors* limits its scope to those who "are Alabamians by birth and education, or who have written books during actual residence in Alabama, but authors who merely happened to have lived a few years in Alabama during childhood are excluded." On the other hand, J. M. Agnew's *Southern Bibliography* includes "those born in the South whether they continued to live there or not and those who have contributed in any way to the social, economic, historical or cultural life of the region." Thus we see birth, education, residence, quite generally accepted as criteria for inclusion in most local author collections, but accepted with qualifications by a few. One library, incidentally, recognizes as a local author any writer whose family or relatives still live in the city. A few libraries also include as local authors those who have written about the area, but who remain guiltless of the other qualifications of birth or residence. One university library reports that the usual test is "residence rather than birth."

Policies regarding selection and inclusion are equally varied. In one state library, Oregon, any book by an Oregon author on Oregon is included, but other material by Oregon authors is carefully selected. Many college and university libraries regard faculty members as local authors per se, and include all of their works, including textbooks, but one library definitely excludes such writings. One state library reports that all local authors except state employees are acceptable, and one public library admits "any local author, if sane." One library, in the miscellaneous group, reports a large collection of local reference material but "strictly avoids collecting anything by local authors." The Grosvenor Library reported that it takes no notice of

the fact of local authorship, while the opposite extreme is represented by the West Virginia State Library, which reports that under its rules and regulations it is required to collect copies of all writings by West Virginians. The Boston Public Library reports that it does not have such a local collection but that one of its branches has a collection for its immediate area. One library includes local authors only if an autographed copy is presented by the author or if the work is of permanent value or interest.

### *Handling and Use of Collections*

Who uses these collections and how much are they used? Many of them are regarded as archival in character and their use is much restricted. They are so solicitously protected as to be of little value to anyone. One notes with interest that where considerable use is reported, the collection is as a rule closely identified with a more general local history collection. A suspicion arises that the source of interest is not in the writers but in the subject. Of the libraries reporting on this matter of use, sixty-two state their collections are but slightly used, nineteen say "frequently," twenty-three "considerably," and eighteen say "a great deal." No measure of such use seems to exist and five frankly state "they can't tell." Eleven report its chief use to be for exhibit purposes, and eight say "for research."

Certain libraries, notably Enoch Pratt, St. Paul, and the Martha Kinney Cooper Library, have worked out definite procedures for handling of such collections. Some libraries substitute a card index for a collection of local authors' writings, regarding it as more important to maintain a complete listing than to assemble the books themselves. One reply is as follows: "A card record of books by local authors

should be sufficient in a general library. To duplicate books by them seems a needless expense, and single copies should be placed with related subject material if they have any value at all. After all, a record of local intellectual activity can be estimated more easily from a card record than from shelves of unrelated books." Some libraries which follow this policy in a modified way stamp their books to indicate local authorship, thus guarding against indiscriminate discarding.

In reply to a question regarding "neighborhood understanding between libraries on the local author problem," only thirty-eight indicate that any division of responsibility exists. The University of Utah does not try to duplicate materials which are the natural specialty of other libraries, such as the library of the Church of Latter Day Saints. The Alderman Library of the University of Virginia reports an interesting cooperative collecting plan which involves the Virginia State Library and the library of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg. They endeavor to avoid competition by setting up a plan for "control by information." The University of Kentucky Library makes no effort to assemble a Kentuckiana collection since a comprehensive one exists in the Louisville Public Library. Both look to the Filson Club for rare items which the public library cannot afford. In Georgia, the Georgia Archives and History Department tends to acquire manuscript and museum material, while the Georgia State Library and the Carnegie Library of Atlanta tend to collect printed books. The North Carolina State Library attempts to make a complete collection of North Carolina authors and encourages county and municipal libraries throughout the state to collect for their own immediate localities. One college library reports that "it aims at in-



clusiveness" for material about the town, and records considerable rivalry on the part of the local historical society.

### *Location*

This brings us to a consideration of the location of such collections. A wide range of opinion was evident as to the most desirable point at which such collections should be maintained. Some favored the state university library, some the state library, some a large public library. Nearly all who commented on the question at all indicated a strong feeling that joint or regional collecting should be encouraged, with the state as a convenient area; that local collecting should be for the immediate town or county only, with close interchange of information and possible deposit of material with the regional collecting agency.

Some such plan has been worked out by the Ontario Library Association, and is under study by some other groups. The program of the Martha Kinney Cooper Library is the most comprehensive and well-organized to show up in this survey, and would well repay close study by anyone interested in the problem of local author collections on a regional basis. Here is a definite attempt to represent all Ohio writers, composers, artists, in as complete a collection of each as possible, through a state-wide organization with active agents in each county. Its many activities include promotion work for Ohio authors, sponsorship of research, awards of merit to contemporary writers,

and publication and distribution of annual bibliographies.

### *Recommendations*

The information obtained through this study tends to support the conclusion that the libraries of any one state or region should come to an understanding as to how extensively they are going to collect local authors, by whom it is to be done, and how. Quite possibly the state library association or a regional association is the agency to initiate such a project. The study indicates the need for a division of responsibility not only to prevent duplication but to insure proper coverage. As to definition of the term "local author," the wide disparity of policies indicates that a more or less arbitrary decision must be reached upon the purpose of the collection, the use to be made of it, and the physical factors of housing and maintenance. The distinction between regional historical material and local author collections should be clarified. A different concept of the underlying philosophy of such collections is of paramount importance. It must be realized that to be truly effective they must include more than history and *belles lettres*, but must represent all fields in which the people of an area are active—art, industry, business, music, the professions, and the sciences.

These conclusions are of value chiefly as further evidence of the growing need for intelligent cooperation among librarians, to the end that the best interests of all may be insured.